

(U) "Ask Zelda!": Emails Going Unanswered

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

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(U) The below column is unclassified in its entirety.



This month's column addresses unresponsiveness, especially by managers and leadership. Zelda received a couple of letters asking for advice on pressing leadership for follow up. They complained about emails going unanswered for weeks and even months, and asked about the proper email etiquette to remind one's boss or colleague to please reply.

Dear Waiting for an Answer,

You ask when it is permissible to simply not answer email. Spam and other shotgun-type messages come to mind... But in my opinion it is rude to simply not answer a work-related email that is specifically addressed to a certain person. Even if you don't know the answer, a quick note to that effect is called for. Yes, managers are busy people, but so are analysts, staff officers, and others.

Now, what to do about it... First off, don't take it personally. Avoid reading too much into the person's non-response. There could be technical glitches, information overload, accidental deletes, emergency leave, or simply varying communication preferences at the root of it. Don't assume the person is intentionally blowing you off, and don't get angry about it.

Please realize that if you are awaiting a response from senior leadership, one problem might be that several people may be accessing her email (the senior, her executive assistant, her office manager), and once the first person (such as the exec, scanning for "hot" items) reads the email, it becomes unbolded and doesn't appear "new" anymore. This might cause the senior to overlook your message.

Below are a few suggestions. Use your best judgment regarding the suitability of each solution for any given situation. If it's an important, mission-related necessity, you can use some of the more drastic (and pushy) measures; but if it's just a "nice to know" or organizational survey about your summer picnic, you can probably proceed without the person's input if none is readily forthcoming.

Email Options

- After a reasonable amount of time, send a follow-up note, including your original text. Perhaps the first one got overlooked.
 - Use the "High Importance" flag (red exclamation point) if it truly is of high importance and urgent. Use this *sparingly*.
 - Request a delivery receipt (under Options, when composing the email) -- at least you can see if the recipient opened your message.
 - Add a Reminder flag for the recipient. When composing the email, select Follow Up, then Flag for Recipients, then select a date and time that you would like them to be reminded about your email.
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- If it is a peer or lower-level employee, cc the person's supervisor or action team for accountability. It's especially important to keep the supervisor in the loop if you are tasking a peer to do something.
- Invoke a higher authority. If this information was requested by the DIRNSA or SIDDIR, dropping that person's name -- especially in the Subject line -- will most likely expedite things.

Non-email Options

- Pick up the telephone! This handy device was once used all the time for business questions. It's easy to ignore an email; harder to ignore the question when you ask someone via phone.
- Contact the senior leader's exec or office manager and ask him to get an answer for you.
- Visit in person -- drop by (if that's acceptable) or request a short (5-15 minute) meeting to discuss the matter face to face.
- Leave a note on the person's desk/monitor/chair/white board/car (OK, don't go that far) asking if they have had a chance to look at your request.
- If it's a significant action, engage the appropriate Registries to task it out and get you a response.
- Call in the big guns. Your boss or someone higher up the chain might have better luck in obtaining a response if it's something that's important to the organization.

Make it Easy for Them to Reply

- First, be sure that you are asking the right person. If someone sees a question outside his area of responsibility, he is more likely to ignore it. If you are unsure of whom to ask, you might consider adding words to this effect: *If you are not the correct person to address this matter, can you please refer me to the appropriate authority?*
- Give the person several ways to contact you (phone numbers, email address(es), room number/desk location). Not everyone likes to communicate by email.
- Along those lines, ask others who know the person what her preferred method of communication is (see **previous column**) or how best to get a response from that individual.
- Ask if there's any additional information you can provide to help them make a decision. Perhaps your initial email was unclear or too long, and they don't realize you're waiting for an answer or what you want from them. Be very brief and clearly state up front what you need from them and by when.

Overall, be polite but persistent. In a perfect world, everyone would answer their email promptly, but it has become increasingly incumbent upon the person needing the information to track it down and pester (nicely) people for answers, thanks to "Big Email" (an offshoot of Big Data??).

One Final Thought

Email is the great leveler. Anyone with a computer or cell phone can now receive email, texts, or tweets from people who were previously inaccessible, such as CEOs and celebrities who engage in those activities. While we've gotten used to this direct contact/access, it would be wise to remember that not so long ago, these people had "gatekeepers" (secretaries, managers, etc.) whom you had to go through to communicate with the big guy -- and there was a reason for that.

I'm just saying...

Zelda
